Ministry Mentors
10/21/11

As I approach my retirement from active ministry I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude for the blessing of it, privately reminiscing a lot about high points and difficult experiences, the weekly rhythm of sermon preparation, ~~monthly~~ meetings, hospital calls, building in momentum to Sunday, when everybody else is having a weekend and you and I are more or less laying it all on the line, and the gentle rhythm of the church year, with its reminder of the profound differences between this vocation and anybody else in the world, ~~measuring time uniquely~~.

And I am thinking a lot about my mentors, seasoned, mature clergy person, who took time to be a friend, to talk things over, to share deep concerns – and those mentors, who in fact wouldn't

have known me from Adam, but who I chose as my mentor and watched from afar at how they did it.

All of which is a way of saying how much I appreciate what Ministry Mentors is and aspires to do. And I am grateful for Don Fagerburg's creative and devoted ministry to all of us and to the whole church.

When I am able I try to be around a radio at 5 pm on Saturday to catch Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion on NPR, particularly his priceless monologues about life in Lake Wobegon, his mythical small town in Northern Minnesota. Many of the monologues, which regularly make me laugh out loud, are about religion and the churches of Lake Wobegon. There is a collection of them published by Augsburg, Life Among the Lutherans. In the introduction he says that, [illegible] he grew up

a fundamentalist in the Sanctified Brethren, who [illegible] us Lutherans, as a "jewel band of large people who made too much of Christmas and took much too much pride in their choirs, more like a social club like the Elks then a gathering of the devout... He has come to appreciate Lutherans, he says, "... people who do their best to be good and walk straight in the world, they gather to give alms to the poor and sing 'Lift Every Voice and sing till earth and heaven ring,' so that tears come to your eyes... they pray.' 'Create in me a clean heart' and go home and put on work clothes and tend their flower beds and grow their lawns."

Lutherans, he says, are people who would rather be in the church basement making coffee and casseroles than leading worship.

Dan Fagerberg is one * and because

I feel free to poke a little fun at Lutherans because I have lived with one for more than fifty years, and the very best thing I ever did in the world was ask her to marry me. And while she became a Presbyterian only after it became inconvenient not to be, I suspect that around February 1, when I retire she will flirt with the idea of returning to the One True and Holy Church.

I don't know how he does it, but Garrison Keillor understands church and he understands ministers particularly.

In one of the chapters in the book "The Pastor's Resume" he tells about Pastor Ingquist, of the Lake Wobegon Lutheran Church – faithful, long-suffering, and very human. We all know this guy.

He and his wife have been looking forward to a Pastor's Retreat in Orlando in February when life in Minnesota is bleak and dreary. They are dreaming about + can almost imagine to sitting around the hotel pool in Florida, little drinks in their hands. The money is in the church budget - $1,800. And then at the Board meeting Val Tollefson stood up and said he believed they ought to be doing more for Rwanda and passed around pictures of the horror and suffering - and so the $1,800 for the Pastor's Retreat was redirected to Rwanda Relief and Pastor Ingquist went home and looked up the Pastor's Wanted column in the denominational magazine.

He updated his resume and sent it to the Dallas/Fort Worth Airport which was looking for a chaplain. He received a phone call and an invitation to fly to Dallas/Fort Worth for an interview - the salary, by the way, was handsome. So he flew down to Dallas, toured

the airport, checked out the non-denominational chapel, carefully non-sectarian, with soft lighting, a table in front with a large Lucite ball hovering over it. and an open Book entitled "Wisdom"

The interview itself never happened. The airport Vice President got called away and Pastor Ingquist flew home and ruminates.

"He was glad to get back – no matter the serious faults it has, and they are serious, home is the place where, when you get there, you know it. You can never separate yourself from the love of God: you can never separate yourself from God. You can never break the connection with the people you love."

How does he know that about us? About how our life long love affair has ups and downs, and days when we wonder why we are doing

this and who actually cares and surely there is a better and more lucrative way to earn a living.

"Tell me, Reverend, how did you get into this business?" We are asked that question all the time. And I don't know about you but I hate it because it takes a while to answer – it's complicated. I wish I could say that I heard a voice in the middle of the night, or I had a clear sign from God. The day I was taken under care of my Presbytery back in Pennsylvania, I had the misfortune of appearing with a young man my age who was questioned about his sense of call. What he said was breathtaking. He knew he wanted to be a Presbyterian minister because God has called him in no uncertain terms. He could name the date and time. Furthermore, God had told him what to major in at Penn State and which courses to take and to apply to Princeton Theological Seminary. When it came time for me – I mumbled

something about liking people and being interested in big philosophical questions. "And where will you pursue your theological education?" they asked. I said I had applied to the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. There was a silence. One of the older members of Presbytery said, "That's McCormick Seminary, right? One of our Presbyterian schools?" And I said, "I guess it was." And they let me in.

The truth is that I did it because I didn't know what else to do. I had a job offer (from IBM) – military service beckoned – a college advisor said, "You are asking big important ideas. Why don't you take a year or two and work on them? You'll never have another opportunity. I know just the place – the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, great facility, demanding. "But I don't want to be a

Div. School? But

minister," I said. "Oh, that's all right. They don't care about that."

So we packed all our earthly belongings in a 57 Ford and came to Chicago.

And then something happened that changed my life. We walked down [redacted] Avenue to the First Presbyterian Church of Chicago and we had never seen anything like it – an interracial congregation, an interracial [redacted], a church that took race relations seriously and modeled its life – something I had never seen before, an idea I had never though of – church as a place that changes the world – for the better. Church – where theological abstraction takes shape in action in the world.

At about the same time I discovered Dietrich Bonhoeffer – not in the curriculum –

God Forbid - I was busy with Whitehead, and Karl Manheim and Gordon Allport but Bonhoeffer said - "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." That was it.

Was God in that? That thought never occurred to me at the time. But of course God was in that and is in all those experiences, encounters, the intellectual itch you cannot scratch, the compassion for the hurting, the wounded, the impatience with injustice and unkindness in the world.

Like Pastor Ingquist, there are close calls along the way, flirtations.

In March of my first year I hit a low spot. I wasn't much interested in academic distraction, I was doing okay, but loved First Presbyterian and the Senior Highs that I was now teaching and leading kept me alive. But I

began to explore ~~abstractions~~, began to check bulletin boards. A new program at Johns Hopkins caught my eye – a PhD in a new, ~~founded,~~ Education Management, all expenses paid. I could see myself as the Superintendant of a big suburb school system. So I applied and they liked me – liked me so much they sent a recruiter to Midway Airport for an interview. I put on my only white shirt and tie and met him in the passenger lounge of United Airlines. As the interview proceeded, the strangest thing began to happen – I became bored, began to look out the window and watch the airplanes taking off. The interview ended. He got back on a plane to Baltimore and I went home to our tiny apartment ~~in~~ Hyde Park to wait for what I was sure was my ticket out of there and into a wonderful new life.

The Johns Hopkins envelope arrived. I opened it eagerly. To my utter astonishment, it

I had never been rejected for anything.

was a form letter rejection. "Thank you for your interest. . . your gifts, however impressive, are not a good match... blah, blah, blah." At the end, a hand written note from the interviewer:

Mr. Buchanan,

I enjoyed out conversation. During the interview you seemed distracted. Maybe you should think a little more about what you want to do with your life. Regards.

Don't you just love the account of the call of Moses in the third chapter of Exodus?

There he is, finally safe and secure, having narrowly escaped Egypt with his life. He has a new wife and a new job, watching his father-in-law's sheep. Life is good.

And then the bush and the voice – I AM WHO I AM – and his name – "Moses" and the amazing theology – The I AM WHO I AM cares about the people Moses just abandoned: hears them cry and wonder of wonders is about to do something to set them free. Moses is delighted with all of this –

Then – the rub –

"I will send you to do the job."

This is not what he wanted to hear. So he negotiates – he tries four times.

- "Who am I that I should go? I'm not qualified."
- Suppose they don't believe me
- I'm a terrible public speaker, and finally – he's begging now, pleading, "O Lord, please send someone else."

I suspect we understand that at a deeply personal level. Before every major responsibility that has come to me, I have had that conversation, or something very much like it, with God, or with whoever was asking me to do something I did not think I was capable of doing.

God wants Moses, apparently. And the fact that you are here this evening – after all that has gone before, whatever it is, and in spite of all you are dealing with, struggling with, fussing and worrying and arguing about now – God wants you. That is pretty much what I have to say + I have come to believe it w/ everything in me . .

I apologize if you came this evening hoping for some practical advice, new tricks of the trade. The fact is – you don't really need that. You probably know plenty already and there is no

shortage of books – and besides you can always ask your mentor.

But, here a few thoughts on not just surviving but flourishing in this amazing vocation:

First

- Take care of yourself. Do not be a literalist about Bonhoeffer's invitation to die – unless the Nazi's take over. Until that happens get enough sleep, eat right, exercise regularly and pay attention to your life-giving relationships – spouse and children.
- Do not miss one-time only events in your children's lives because of a church meeting. Say – I can't be there because my daughter is playing first violin in the concert, or I'll have to leave at 4:00 because my son is starting at center at 4:30. You can not only get away with it,

but your people will appreciate you modeling responsible parenting.

Sometimes we are devastated when someone implies that ministry is not hard work. "What do you do the other six days of the week, Reverend?" Don't try to prove them wrong, or prove yourself, by working harder and longer than anyone else. It won't work anyhow and you'll do damage to yourself and your family.

That's first. Second is Pay the Rent. It's an old idea, by the way, from James Dittes who used to teach at Yale.

- The Rent – Dittes says – is the same for every parish regardless of size.
- Make sure the budget is balanced and bills paid
- Make sure the furnace works and the sidewalk shoveled

- Make sure your people know you are available when they need you
- And pay enough attention to sermon preparation that your people won't be embarrassed when they bring their friends to church

Paying the rent is not full time work, Dittes said. But it must be paid and if and once paid you are free to do other things.

Third don't marry a clergy spouse or have preacher's kids.

- If your spouse wants to be deeply involved in the church, fine. That's his or her business. But it does not come along with the marriage covenant.
- And do not have expectations of your children because of what you do for a living – anymore than anyone else. If your

children say "PK" – preacher's kids – wash their mouths out with soap

Fourth

- Praise your predecessor at every opportunity. Some people will never believe you can live up to her or him.
- Agree with them. Forget about it.

Fifth

- Give sermon preparation the time and priority it deserves. Carve out time. Tell people you are carving out time – you'll be reading, studying on Wednesday morning and writing on Thursday. You'll be in the office at noon. Unless you're close to death don't call me then.

Finally

- Remember in the midst of it all the grace you proclaim, is for you, too.
- The forgiveness you assure them God extends – is extended to you.
- The love of God, from which nothing, not even death, you tell them, is for you.
- As you break the bread and share the cup – remember it is for you, too.

Remember that however you came to be here this evening, however tortured, circuitous, or straight as an arrow your route – God has been in it every day every step of the way.